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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the High/Scope National Policy Conference, which was concerned with the process of designing good early childhood legislation and the political processes that enhance or impede legislative passage. Discussion began with an overview of the range of options facing policymakers as they attempt to design legislation or write regulations to govern state-funded programs. Following the overview, three states were featured for an in-depth look at their experience in designing and implementing early childhood legislation: South Carolina, Massachusetts, and Illinois. Concluding discussion focused on curriculum issues including the relative merit of different curriculum models, quality programs in the public schools, and the need for a comprehensive, systematic curriculum based on accepted child development principles. (RH)

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STATE EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERTS AT HIGH/SCOPE CONFERENCE GRAPPLE WITH DESIGNING, ENACTING PRE-K LEGISLATION

By Leslie de Pietro and Goranka Vukelich

"We are here to learn what other states are doing in the field of early childhood care and education and to share what we are doing here in Michigan," announced Libby Richards, aide to Governor James Blanchard, as she welcomed some 40 early childhood policymakers from 23 states to the High/Scope national policy conference held in Clinton, Michigan, in mid-June. "We hope that as a result of the input and sharing that takes place during this conference, we will achieve stronger programs and better policy nationally."

The focus of the conference was on the process of designing good early childhood legislation and on the political processes which either enhanced or impeded legislative passage.

Lawrence Schweinhart, Director of the Voices for Children Project at High/Scope, gave an overview of the range of options facing policymakers as they attempt to design legislation or write regulations to govern state-funded programs. Policymakers must first decide who should be served. In making that determination, they may decide to use an income criterion (such as Head Start does), or they may use a "child test"(such as the DIAL or the Gesell Developmental Evaluation).

"The problem with using readiness tests is that so many normally developing 5-year-olds are excluded from kindergarten because the tests are often designed to measure abstract, symbolic learning, which is more appropriate for 7-year-olds who are developmentally ready for learning at a more abstract level. Also, these tests often exclude high-risk children who can benefit most from a quality program," stated Schweinhart.

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The second factor that must be considered is program duration and hours of operation. Schweinhart identified three types of early childhood programs, two of which only partially meet needs of working parents. These are part-day programs, full-school-day programs, and full-day programs. Another variation is the half-school-year (20-week) program, which is being offered by a handful of districts around the country. Schweinhart noted not only that this option fails to address needs of working parents, but also that there is little research to indicate that programs offered for this limited time frame have any lasting effect.

Schweinhart claimed that who should be funded for provision of service is the "prime political question," since one of the biggest dangers to the passage of good legislation is competition between multiple players, such as private child care providers, the public schools, and Head Start. There are advantages and disadvantages to exclusive funding of any one of these agencies, which is why many legislatures have designed a process that would make the money available to any applicant who meets a series of criteria.

The final question is how much should be spent. The answer depends on such factors as teachers' salaries, how many adults in the classroom, the types of ancillary services provided, maximum class size, transportation costs, etc.

Legislative bodies are more willing than they were a few years ago to consider investing in high quality early childhood programs. However, they may need educating about the components of quality in a program. "It will be up to us to see to it that these programs are of the highest quality, in order to ensure a high return on the public's investment," concluded Schweinhart.

Following the overview, three states were featured for an in-depth look at their experience in designing and implementing early childhood legislation. All speakers emphasized that careful, thoughtful coalition-building is imperative to the success of both processes. According to Hannah Meadors of the Governor's office in South Carolina, "You need three things to design and work through the passage of good legislation--hard work, tenacity, and a thick skin."

According to Meadors, one of the major strengths of the South Carolina legislation was the inclusion of interagency coordinating councils at both the state and the local levels. At the state level, heads of the major state departments with responsibility for children's services became heavily invested in the legislation, since they had helped to hammer out the bill. At the local level, the interagency councils provide a forum for airing "turf issues" and help ensure coordination of services.

Other unique features of the legislation include the option for school districts to subcontract with "appropriate agencies or groups" to provide service, and the provision of home-based outreach services to hard-to-reach families. Although funding is for half-day programs, districts have the option to provide full-day programs if desired.

The South Carolina regulations require a maximum 1 to 10 adult-to-child ratio and a maximum class size of 20. Teachers must be certified in early childhood education or have a degree in early child development.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts has appropriated $10 million for funding early childhood legislation for programs beginning this fall, reported Nancy Richardson, policy analyst with the state legislature. Of that amount, $2.5 million

will go to Head Start programs across the state. The legislation allows districts to contract out services to community agencies if they do not opt to start their own. Preparation for the start-up of new programs is facilitated by one-time planning grants to the districts that would, among other things, allow districts time to appoint local community advisory committees, which are mandated by the legislation.

"The principal reason this bill passed," claimed Richardson, "was because two key legislators were able to negotiate deals with a variety of interest groups and still keep the essential ingredients of the bill intact."

The Massachusetts legislation provides for a maximum class size of 15, and a maximum adult-to-child ratio of 1 to 10. The Department of Education has been charged with developing statewide program standards and a teaching certificate for those who teach children from age three through third grade. Another unique feature of this plan is to recognize outstanding, innovative leaders in the field by awarding them fellowships that permit them to spend a year consulting with their peers across the state.

Illinois

Barbara Bowman, of the Erikson Institute, and a past president of NAEYC, responded from both a national perspective and from the perspective of one who has been deeply involved the the recent passage of an early childhood bill in Illinois.

"The sudden passage of early childhood legislation around the country has been a weird combination of serendipity and inevitability," stated Bowman. "We're getting there, but how we're getting there is cause for concern. My perception is that the compromises we are forced to make in

order to survive in the political arena may not always produce legislation that is in the best interest of children."

The Illinois early childhood legislation provided $12.1 million for programs for 3-to-5-year old children who are individually screened and found to be at risk of academic failure. Subcontracting with not-for-profit agencies is permitted. Teachers must be certified in early childhood education or must meet the requirements for supervising a day care center under state regulations.

Bowman offered some advice to those in the process of designing new legislation. "Do it right from the start. It's harder to change the legislation once it's in place than to make it right from the very start," she stated. "Don't make too many compromises or the results will be too watered down to help the very children we're trying to reach."

Curriculum Issues

David Weikart, President of High/Scope, said that once the Perry longitudinal study and other good research in the field had established that the preschool experience does have long-term benefits, the next question had to be: "Does the type of curriculum experienced during the preschool years make a difference?"

The answer to this question may emerge in part from the results of a 15-year study (the Curriculum Demonstration study) comparing the effects of three curriculum models--a direct-instruction model, a traditional nursery school model, and the High/Scope curriculum model. According to self-reports at age 15, the group that attended the direct-instruction preschool engaged in twice as many delinquent acts as the other two curriculum groups. This group reported relatively poor relations with families, less

participation in sports, and less reaching out to others for help with personal problems.

"These findings, based on small sample size [54 participants responded at age 15], are by no means definitive. However, they do raise some important questions. They may indicate that children who are allowed to initiate some of their own learning may grow up to be more self-directed and better problem solvers," stated Weikart. This does not mean at all that we are saying that the High/Scope curriculum is the only method. On the contrary, the traditional nursery school approach appears to have had equally positive outcomes. Nor are we saying you should not teach by the direct instruction method. We have raised some questions that need further research before we can arrive at any conclusions, we need to be aware of the potential that these findings reveal."

Panelist Bertha Campbell, former director of New York state's experimental preschool programs which have been operating since 1966, claimed that a high quality program must offer comprehensive services and must, in particular, do more than just pay lip-service to parent involvement and staff development. She maintained that the public schools not only can provide quality programs, but they are the logical forum for reaching the child at risk. She cautioned, however, that the quality of programs will depend in large measure on the degree of training and commitment of the classroom teacher.

Ms. Campbell also stressed the importance of a curriculum that allows children to participate in their own learning. "Every time you tell a child something, you rob him of the opportunity to discover it for himself."

Jenni Klein, former chief of the education branch for National Head

Start, began her presentation by emphasizing the need for a comprehensive, systematic curriculum based on accepted child development principles. Recalling the work of Jean Piaget, she emphasized the characteristics of the preoperational stage of thinking and added that it is impossible to provide a high quality curriculum without understanding how the preschool child thinks and learns.

"Both teachers and children should share in the responsibility of initiating learning activities," said Klein. She stressed that learning is an ongoing process largely dependent on an individual's active exploration and interaction with the environment. "This is not likely to show up in test results, especially in the early years," she stated.

This conference, with broad representation from state governments around the coutry, testifies to the perceived importance of early childhood education among state policymakers at this time. By its interaction between early childhood educators and policymakers, the conference helped to shape developing state early childhood policies around the country. Further, it demonstrated the real potential of positive interaction between early childhood educators and policymakers, an interaction that can only benefit coming generations of young children and their families.